

BOOK WORLD

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Gunboats to gunships

ROOTS OF INVOLVEMENT: The U.S. in Asia, 1784-1971. By Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel. Norton. 336 pp. \$8.95.

By John K. Fairbank

TV news reporters have long been both the messengers and the chorus in our Greek tragedy. They watch the world's leaders pursue their outworn national goals and meet their inevitable self-created disasters, and then offer comment on the facts. Marvin Kalb of CBS and Elie Abel, head of the Columbia School of Journalism, have focused on the American decisions concerning Vietnam from Roosevelt to Nixon. They have combed through the voluminous record of ex-officials' reminiscences and followed up with private interviews. Cross-checking this inside story, they have produced a tightly written, fast-paced narrative that is probably both the briefest and the most comprehensive analytic account of the decision-making in America's Vietnam tragedy.

The American involvement with East Asians has been consistent—urging them to do things our way, come to God, and accept international law. Thus when the Koreans refused to negotiate with our mission of 1871, we had to kill several hundred of them. The case of Vietnam traces back directly to the death of FDR, who would have kept the French from returning to Indochina. "On February 8, 1945, Roosevelt told Stalin that he would like to see United Nations trusteeships established for Korea and Indochina." Asian nationalism, he felt, had to be accepted. But "Truman and Acheson, on the contrary, looking at the new world through their European prism, made it possible for the French to return to Indochina by subsidizing their disastrous war effort there."

Eisenhower in turn "greatly expanded" the American support of the French in Indochina. By the spring of 1954 this was running at \$1,133,000,000 a year, "almost exactly one-third of the total foreign aid budget." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Radford, wanted to use tactical nuclear weapons against the Viet Minh near Dien Bien Phu, but was willing to settle for "one massive air strike" by 200 American war planes, and if this did not "break the enemy's will to resist" then other

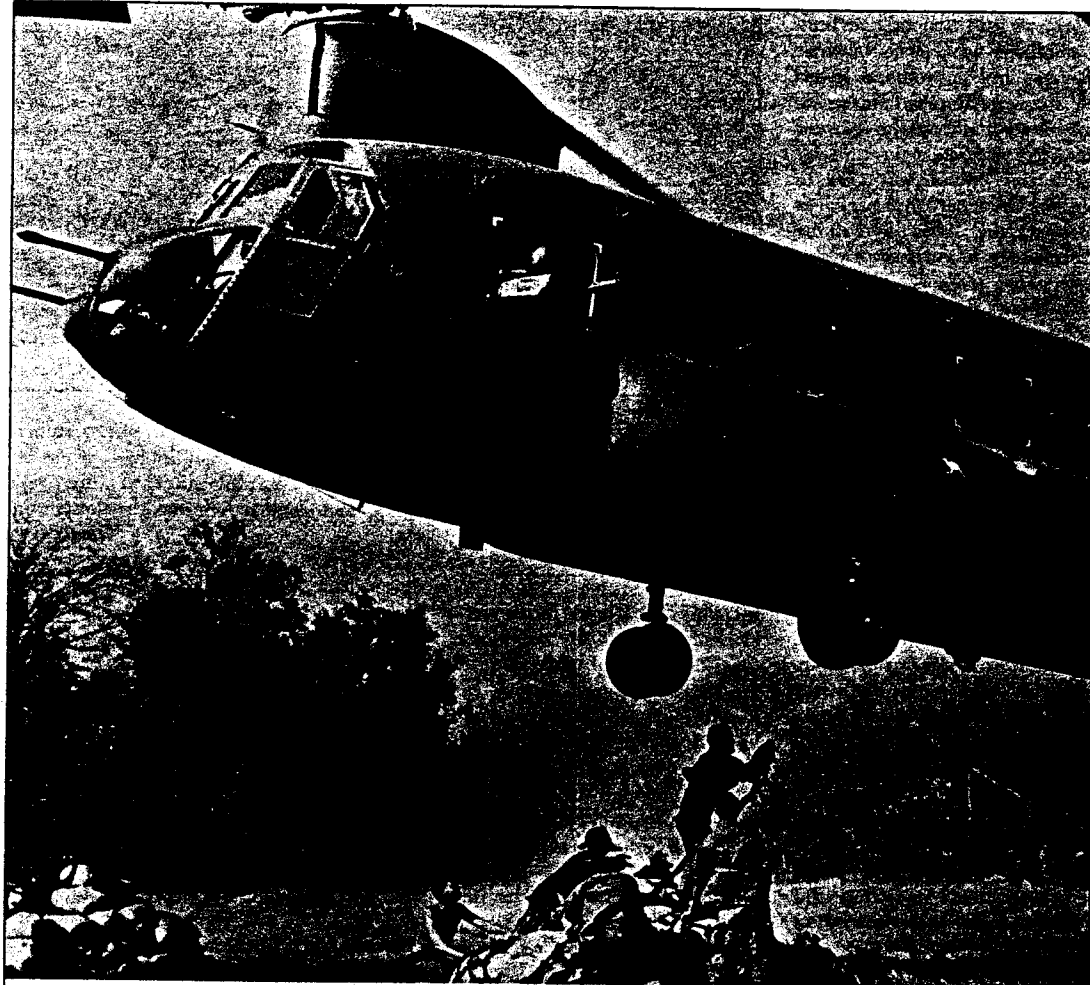
strikes could follow, plus American paratroopers, closing Haiphong harbor, and so on. Eisenhower approved, providing the Allies and the Congress would approve. This provisional American decision to fight, in March 1954, was not approved by Radford's colleagues on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Meanwhile Lyndon Johnson said a joint resolution of the Congress would depend on whether the Allies would agree. But Anthony Eden refused to support this military effort to save Dien Bien Phu. Churchill told his cabinet that Dulles was asking

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them to "assist in misleading the Congress into approving a military operation which would be in itself ineffective and might well bring the world to the verge of a major war."

In the Quemoy crisis of September, 1954, Dulles told Mike Mansfield that the time had come to teach Mao a "lesson," and he had decided to order a major American air attack against Communist China for which he wanted Mansfield's support. The senator refused, and Eisenhower backed away. But the idealization of Diem, rather reminiscent of the idealization of Chiang Kai-shek in the 1940s, went along with a rhetorical escalation and more and more declarations that the American "national interest" or "vital interest" was involved in Vietnam—for example, in Eisenhower's April 4, 1959 speech at Gettysburg.

Kennedy inherited this tradition. The crisis seemed then to be concentrated on Laos, but it was defused by



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the neutralization agreements of 1962. Meanwhile Kennedy also became steadily more committed to saving South Vietnam. Neutralization of Southeast Asia as proposed by Chester Bowles was considered out of the question. The rhetoric of commitment continued to escalate. A green light for a generals' coup d'état against Diem if he would not dismiss his brother and move for reform was cabled to Saigon on August 24, 1963. But Diem, like Chiang, did not reform. He and his brother were not murdered until November.

Behind the Vietnam problem was the American fear of China because it was Communist and no longer pro-American. On September 9, 1963, Kennedy said on NBC:

Strongly in our mind is what happened in the case of China at the end of World II, when China was lost—a weak government became increasingly unable to control events. We don't want that...

He also said he believed *(Continued on page 3)*

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(Continued from page 1) in the domino theory:

China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists.

LBJ inherited this posture from Kennedy. Kalb and Abel recount the president's successive escalations with a keen eye for the factors of personality and of foreign and domestic strategy that led him on. They make a thriller out of the eventual effort by Clifford and others to turn the war around. For a long time LBJ had contemplated announcing in March, 1968 that he would not run again. On March 25, the Senior Advisory Group, the "wise men," assembled to appraise the best move for America in the wake of the Tet offensive. They concluded that the president had set his sights too high. The war could not be won by military victory. "The presi-

dent looked stricken when it was all over." The establishment that once supported him had now let him down. He wondered if the briefing officers had not been "reached." "Who poisoned the well?" the president wanted to know.

Kalb and Abel finished this book after Cambodia but before Laos. After looking back over the persistent, partly unconscious American decision-makers' tendency to get always more deeply involved, they end on an upbeat, as all good commentators and choruses should. Johnson by withdrawing from public life "took the first major step toward cutting an Asian obsession down to a manageable nuisance." Nixon's "historic contribution may well prove to have been not that he ended the war but that he shrank Vietnam down to size." So Nixon seeks "a Korean-type settlement in Southeast Asia." In short, the Americans have lost their post-World War II feeling of omnipotence. These authors conclude that

Unfortunately Vietnam was not an aberration. The inexorable progression—from Yankee clipper to

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Yangtse gunboat to helicopter gunship—suggests that Vietnam was but a terrible moment in America's swashbuckling adventures in Asia.

We will not turn our backs on Asia, they feel, but are headed for a degree of accommodation with China.

Years hence when the 1960s are seen as a Dark Age, two things may stand out from the record of destructive decisions so enthrallingly pin-pointed in this book: First, that our elected power-holders are so gripped by their responsibility for that outdated abstraction the "national interest" (U.S. vs. Them) that they cease thinking and follow gut reactions, the old tribal fears, and wind up preferring to kill rather than be defeated (this is known as power politics). Second, the old American love-hate hang-up over China (remember that beautiful Vietnamese girl Lt. Calley loved so?) still haunts our public life. We haven't begun to understand ourselves. As our current president continues to widen down the war, perhaps our best hope lies in the kind of humiliating perspective Kalb and Abel have given us. *